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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002205

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PHUM NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA,S MOOD REMAINS SOUR

REF: A. ABUJA 1385

1B. LAGOS 2574

CLASSIFIED BY CDA RICK ROBERTS FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d).

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Nigerians remain in the same funk as in August (Ref A). Throughout the country the loudest sound is that of grumbling, both stomachs and mouths. While the economy continues to fester, President Obasanjo's policies -- whether reform or asserting his authority -- stoke the coals of discontent in virtually every walk of society. Obasanjo's two international spectaculars occurred on schedule and without disruptions, he has been winning on gasoline deregulation (although the GON apparently just pegged the price again -- Ref B) and slimming the government (and removing those who have incurred his wrath), and the Court of Appeals has not thrown out his election. The Nigerian masses, however, see neither benefit nor reason from any of this and, in fact, grumble more because of the President's apparent insensitivity to what they feel is important. Obasanjo's famously vindictive nature and penchant for revenge on anyone he perceives as challenging his ultimate work alienate even his supporters. Most of the original leaders of his ruling PDP have since left the party. And this funk carries across most segments of Nigerian society.  
End Summary.

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THE POLITICAL CLASS  
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12. (C) The most common theme among politicians today is despair and anger. Whether members of the opposition or the ruling party, whether winning or losing, politicians encountered in all regions of the country say President Obasanjo is entirely focused on creating an international image for himself at the expense of Nigeria's interests. The political class generally does not see Nigeria, or themselves, moving forward -- only Obasanjo. It would seem as sour grapes on a massive scale, except that it also comes from many working in the ruling PDP and Obasanjo's administration.

13. (C) These politicos' reaction ranges from "why bother" to "its time for a revolution." Why bother appears to hold a winning hand, although talking about revolution is popular among intellectuals and those unable to eat from the trough. Many of those who do have their snouts in complain that Obasanjo treats them as "family staff," hiring and firing them at will. The politicians not on Obasanjo's payroll do not expect him to last out 2004, and they debate among themselves whether his downfall will be accomplished by politicians, the military or the masses. But the politicos are not yet ready to advance plans for action, let alone resolve the outstanding issues in Nigeria. They are merely cognizant that at every turn in Nigeria's history it was the military who came to sort out the mess made by the political class, and they would like to avoid that this time.

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THE MASSES  
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14. (C) Still reeling from the price hikes of fuel "deregulation," more Nigerians than ever are sinking into poverty. There is more gasoline in Abuja and Lagos, but retrenchment is the word of the day among government workers, with NNPC already slashing another 1,300 jobs and the expectation that the government as a whole will slash up to forty percent of its staff in the next few weeks (many of whom are already not getting paid their salaries/pensions, benefits or both). All of the newly out-of-work civil servants will join the approximately forty percent of the nation's workforce already unemployed. (Among recent university graduates, the rate is closer to 75 percent.) Most Nigerians are still longing for the "dividends of democracy," but Obasanjo is asking them to suffer longer to improve the nation. One even occasionally hears, among civilians, of longing for a return to the military, comments that "at least things worked."

15. (C) Others among the masses are ready to battle the non-representative system and officials imposed through the faulty 2003 elections, but remain skeptical of who would lead them. During the July fuel strikes, they were ready to fight to the finish under the NLC; today there is precious little support for a strike and most folks believe the NLC leadership will sell out labor's interests in return for government favors.

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MILITARY  
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16. (C) The military's respect for democratic institutions is still strong but could be eroding. The GON has not paid military pensions for months. In a series of lectures this fall to officers on issues of the day, Obasanjo alienated many officers when he left out military issues. According to officers attending several of the various meetings held in about eight locations around the country, the President sought no advice from the military on the current security situation in the country. Instead he harangued them for not doing their jobs well, and told them that they had no choice but to back him "in the name of democracy." Perceived as unconcerned about the welfare of the soldiers, Obasanjo brushed off questions and embarrassed the officers in front of their subordinates. According to the wife of one general, "the (enlisted) ranks are grumbling that the officers do not care about them and believe that they should intervene to save the country."

17. (C) Talk in the barracks is openly critical of the President, and allusions to coup plots are openly bruited. According to one GON intelligence officer, the admonition from Nigeria's founding fathers that the "worst democracy is better than the best military government" is being discounted. "Most believe we have no democracy," he said. While most soldiers want to feel loyal to the constitution and the country, the awareness that they are being asked to sacrifice for parochial interests rather than the good of the nation abounds. He asserted that 80 percent of the votes cast in the barracks during the presidential elections were for Buhari; comparing that with the rather different results announced for Obasanjo would indicate the degree of danger. In another recent meeting, on COJA security, one high-ranking general reportedly upbraided Vice President Atiku for the regime's insensitivity towards the needs of the military. The general told the VP that the military would not respond to security calls without a clear mission guideline, transport for the troops and logistical support on the ground. "None of these existed during COJA," he said.

18. (C) Military officers tell us the bottom line, however, is that individually and as an institution they believe civilians do not want a military coup, much less another military government. President Obasanjo has been successful in forcing out military officers who would seek government power for power's sake, and has also placed fellow southerners or Christians in virtually every position commanding significant numbers of soldiers.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Grumbling continues unabated, and Obasanjo is not changing course despite the criticism. Most interlocutors contacted recently predict that the Obasanjo administration will not survive until 2007. The politicians, however, remain unwilling to cooperate with each other to bring that about by political means. In the absence of political movement, a coup can only come from the military stepping in to effect change, or from the frustrated and angry masses coming onto the streets. The NLC strike threat seems to be fizzling, although a decision against Buhari in the courts could bring mass action. More likely than either, given Nigerians, well-known patience in the face of suffering, most people will continue to muddle along without any resolution of the underlying problems. Perhaps the Obasanjo administration can turn its attention to them, now that international shows have departed the Nigerian stage.  
Roberts